A Detailed Guided Meditation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 45:00

Firstly, we must settle our body into a meditative posture. Some sit on chairs, others use kneeling stools, but the usual position is to sit on the floor with a cushion in a cross-legged posture. Your hands should rest on your lap, preferably one on top of the other. Now whatever posture you adopt it should at first feel comfortable. Then make sure the spine is straight though keeping its natural curvature. It's best not to lean against anything for this will induce sleep.

Now imagine a puppet string running from the base of the spine to the top of the head and it being gently pulled up so that all the vertebrae separate and there's a feeling of growing tall and light. A feeling of energy running up the spine without any tension or tightness. And the head should feel balanced on top. Now just let everything relax off that central column.

Here we can help ourselves relax with some simple exercises. Firstly, let's see how relaxed we can become by simply telling muscles to relax. Start from the top of the head and go down the rest of the body, relaxing muscles as best you can. So start at the top of the head, come down over the brow, the eyes, the cheeks, the jaw, especially the jaw, the neck, shoulders, arms, and hands. Just feel everything getting heavier as tension stops supporting them. Now go back to the chest. Relax it. Go down the body to the stomach, to the abdomen. Just relaxing as best as you can. And finally, just feel your legs heavy on the floor.

Superficial surface tension should now be released if only a little, but we may feel a deeper level of tension more habitual and therefore not easy to relax by a mental volition. We can use a second technique here of muscular tension. Where you feel tension, tense the muscles in that area as hard as you can and release them slowly. This is especially good for tension in the face. Just screw up the face as much as you can now. Hold it. And relax. Now let's try that again. Hold it. Hold it. And relax.

It's also good for the neck and shoulders. Just tighten up that whole area now. Hold it. And relax slowly. Let's try that again. Tighten up the whole area. Neck and shoulders. Hold it. And just relax slowly.

A third technique is best for tensions felt in the chest, though it has an effect on the whole body. Controlled breathing. Take a slow, deep in-breath, fill the lungs to capacity, hold for as long as comfortable, and just let the whole ribcage fall quickly, expelling all the air. Then wait for the next breath to arise naturally, and this will prevent hyperventilation. So now let's take in a deep breath, hold it, and just let it go. Let's try that again. Take a deep breath. Hold it. And just let it go.

Hopefully you will have developed a deep relaxation. So now we should find ourselves in a posture highly

conducive for meditation. The spine should be energised but not tense. The rest of the body should feel relaxed, hanging, as it were, off this central column of the spine. And the head should be gently poised on top, symbolising the balance between physical alertness and relaxation. So now, for a few moments, let's feel this posture as a whole, and recognise its qualities of alert energy and yet calm relaxation.

Now we need to develop the same sense of energetic alertness and relaxed calmness in the mind, and to achieve this we use the breath. Place your attention on the abdomen and feel its rising and falling motion as you breathe naturally. Please note this is not a breathing technique. The breath should not be interfered with. Now it may be that the breath is not obvious to you at the abdomen, in which case see if you can feel it at the chest, rising and falling. The breath at the nostrils may also be used, but for the Mahāsi technique it is preferable to use the abdomen. See now which one is most obvious to you.

Now whichever place you've chosen, this is your primary object of meditation. This means you will use this place to establish an alert and calm awareness. If you move from one place to another, say from the nose to the abdomen, this will undermine your ability to become concentrated, that is, the ability to watch with an alert but calm attention without flitting away.

If you're watching the breath process at the abdomen or chest, observe the movement, the rising and falling, and use a noting word to still the thinking process. With the in-breath, note "rising, rising," and with the out-breath, note "falling, falling." After the out-breath, there's a rest, and there's danger that the mind will run away on fantasies. Now, to stop this happening, we choose a touch point. It may be the feeling of your hands on your lap, or the feelings of your legs on the floor. Choose what is most obvious.

So as you feel the abdomen or chest rising with the in-breath, feel those feelings, watch them closely and point your attention directly at them, noting "rising, rising." In the same way as you feel the abdomen or chest falling with the out-breath, feel the feelings, the sensations of the movement. Watch them intently and note "falling, falling." If there's a pause before the in-breath, note a touching point: "touching, touching, touching." Now be sure as soon as the in-breath starts to return immediately to the abdomen or the chest.

If you're concentrating at the nostrils, it's the same, except it's more appropriate to use the noting words "in, in," "out, out," while remembering to concentrate on the sensations at the nostrils or the upper lip, wherever the passage of air is felt most acutely.

Please note it doesn't matter how many times you say the noting word. Once may be enough. What is important is to be attentive to the feelings or sensations as they arise. The word itself is of little importance. It's just a simple and very effective way to stop the mind from wandering. What you must pay attention to are all the sensations caused by the process of breathing.

Now you may find that your mind wanders off on thoughts and fantasies. When you wake up out of them, just note "thinking, thinking," or "dreaming, dreaming," once or twice, and then quickly and firmly go

back to watching the sensations of breathing. But you mustn't be rough or forceful. Training the mind is a bit like training a puppy dog to sit. When it gets up, you have to pat it down kindly but firmly. If you get angry and hit it, it will just want to run away.

So now, let's practice this breathing meditation for a while, observing and noting all the sensations. "Rising... falling, touching." If your mind is wandering, note what it's doing – dreaming, thinking, worrying, and so on – and bring it back gently but firmly to the breath. If you feel sleepy, put more energy into the spine, sit tall, but not tense.

This part of the meditation is mainly concerned with establishing concentration. It's normal to spend a good ten minutes doing this until the mind becomes fairly still, at least until gross restlessness has gone, and you can watch the object, in this case the breath, fairly constantly. We use the breath because it's a neutral feeling – it doesn't excite or depress us. So the mind becomes still and moves to a point of concentration by way of calm and peacefulness.

This is different from the sort of concentration we get when we are doing something engrossing, such as watching a film, or having to do a job carefully. That depends upon stimulation, but the concentration we need for insight must arise out of a quiet and still mind. And when this sort of concentrated, quiet mind is established, we find another faculty becomes prominent: our intuitive intelligence, *paññā*.

Sometimes, when you're trying to listen to shortwave radio, there's so much interference, it's hard to hear exactly what's being said. Once the fuzz goes, everything becomes clear. So it is with paññā, our intuitive intelligence. Once the heart is calm and concentrated, and thinking and imagining has stopped, the intuitive intelligence is able to see and understand clearly what's going on.

So now, what we have to do is establish this concentrated attentiveness, alive with intelligence, *satipaññā*, not just on the breath, but on anything that comes into our field of awareness. The example I like is that of a bird watcher. They sit in a so-called hide. They hide there, hidden from the birds they are watching. In this way, the birds are not disturbed, and their natural habits can be observed. All the knowledge, such as of feeding, nesting, mating, and so on, comes by just observing, merely watching. In this way, this ability to be simply observers, interested to discover the true nature of our body, mind, and heart, is the key to spiritual insight.

But this watching, please understand clearly, is not a searching for something. We are not looking for something. We're just non-interfering observers, just looking at whatever comes into our field of awareness, just watching whatever arises right here and now, while it's happening, without any thoughts about it or questions.

So we begin by establishing attentiveness on the breath. Should a sound be heard, we avert to it immediately, noting "hearing, hearing." Now, try to catch the quality of the sound at the very eardrum. In this way, we'll stop the mind flying out, as it were, to the object, such as a chirping bird or passing car, and

set up a whole train of imaginative thoughts.

The same with smell. Note it as "smelling, smelling," right there in the nostrils. And again with any sensations on the body, such as itching and prickling, just note "itching, itching," "prickling, prickling," right there where the sensations are felt, and plunge your attention into them.

Then there are feelings that arise in the body, such as heat and cold, heaviness and lightness, all sorts of discomforts and pleasures. A particular word, such as "heat" or "cold," can be used where appropriate, otherwise a general word, "feeling," can be used. Now, it's important we don't react to these feelings unless they are too severe to tolerate, for to react to them will lead us into restlessness. And do remember the noting word is a technique we use to keep the attention steady on the object. In other words, it controls the thinking faculty, but the attention itself should bury itself into the actual sensations.

Again, there are feelings in the body arising from moods and emotions. Dislikeable ones, such as fear and depression, and likeable ones such as joy and love. We can use specific words here, such as "love," "guilt," and so on, but all the time feeling fully the mood or emotion, the actual feelings wherever they occur, such as in the chest or stomach.

Finally, there are thoughts and images. Note these as "thinking" or "imagining," and they will stop. Otherwise, they will carry you off onto a daydream, sometimes for the whole of the meditation period. And be especially aware of the judging mind: "That's terrible," "That's good," "That's bad," "That's nice," and so on. Don't correct or interfere with such thoughts. Just acknowledge them and note "judging, judging."

We're not trying to become spectators, getting involved in all the mental play, supporting this against that. We must take the position of an observer, an objective observer, just allowing all the play to unfold right there before our very gaze. All the time we're trying to maintain that separation, that distance, that detachment from what's going on in the body, mind and heart. We observe all these psychophysical events as something other, as if belonging to someone else. In this way we can investigate objectively.

So whatever is offered – a sensation, a feeling, a thought – just watch it carefully. So now, let's sit tall, and with keen interest, let's watch the flow of physical and mental phenomena. Begin always with the breath: "rising, falling, touching."

If the mind is wandering, note what it's doing – dreaming, thinking, worrying, and so on – and bring it back to the breath, firmly but gently. If there's sloth, energise the spine, re-establish the posture, slowly, very slowly, or you may disturb your concentration, noting the whole movement: "straightening, straightening."

Sometimes there's a lot of pain, aching and tension comes up in the body. This won't be due to posture so long as the posture is correct. They'll probably be caused by unresolved emotions and mental states that have until now been suppressed out of consciousness. It's important to relax around them and develop an

attitude of interest. Such discomfort, sometimes severe, may continue throughout a whole sitting or for many sittings until it resolves itself, and it may be that the underlying reason, such as an emotion, will not manifest itself. Just the passing of the discomfort will mean that the curing has taken place.

We need to develop patience to bear this sort of thing and use the opportunity to see pain as pain – just sensations – and to separate out the suffering which is the aversion or fear we feel towards them. We make both sides, the painful sensations and the mental attitudes, objects to be noted, observed, and understood.

So, keep noting, keep observing, maintaining a sharp attentiveness. If you get lost, start again with the breath, your home base and anchor. Always begin again with the breath: "rising, falling, touching."

If your mind is wandering, bring it back firmly but gently to the primary object of our meditation, the breath. If there's tiredness or dullness, raise energy up the spine by sitting tall, though not tense, remember. Be especially aware of tension around the shoulders, neck and jaw.

Here we are sitting within ourselves, as it were, watching the inner films. The body, mind and heart display themselves just as they want. We don't interfere. It's a natural process of revelation. In time, many things may arise out of the subconscious which have long been suppressed. They'll reveal themselves when the time is right and the time is right when we'll be ready to accept them. In this way, insight meditation brings about a psychotherapy. Even painful traumatic memories from childhood will be eventually cleared out of the system, and with them all the neuroses and tensions they've caused. All we have to do to attain this purification of the heart is to remain steadfast at our observation post.

Now, although the cleansing of our psychology will happen naturally, it's not the aim of our meditation. The aim of our practice is to go to the deepest levels to see why suffering arises in the first place. One way is to note the relationship we have to whatever is being observed. The mind constantly jumps from liking to disliking, wanting what it likes, not wanting what it dislikes. This sort of involvement is simply a way in which we try to find happiness in pleasurable states and escape unhappiness by running away from unpleasurable states.

This constant oscillation, this ricocheting from greed to aversion and back to greed, this is what the Buddha taught as the cause of our suffering in the Second Noble Truth. So, as pleasurable or unpleasurable objects arise, we must keenly note this secondary reaction of grabbing at them or pushing them away, sometimes turning away in fear, the twin of aversion. In this way, this reaction will cool down and even stop, and we shall experience a deeply satisfying equanimous mind. And this in turn will allow us to investigate deeper into the causes of suffering.

So let all that pain and pleasure surface and express itself. Watch the reaction, the grabbing, the aversion, the fear. Begin again with the breath: "rising, falling, touching."

If your mind is wandering, note what it's been doing and re-establish your concentration on the breath. If

you're sleepy, sit tall and raise energy up the spine.

As we begin to deepen our awareness of all the phenomena arising in our body, mind and heart, we'll become increasingly aware of what the Buddha called the three characteristics of existence. The first is the fact of transience. Everything is arising only to pass away.

The second is the difficult teaching of non-self. As we watch all these mental and physical phenomena, we'll notice they arise of themselves. There's no one controlling them. They have their own life, their own energy. At times the body, mind and heart may seem distant, something other. Before we talked of "my sensations," "my thoughts," "my emotions," but now we find ourselves pointing at them, as it were, through the noting technique. "There's a sensation," "there's a thought," "there's a feeling." We're slowly moving away from a relationship of identity and possession: "I am my seeing," "I am what I think," "I am what I feel," "I have a body," "I have a mind," "I have a heart." Instead, we're moving towards a position of detachment. This is the beginning of the experience of non-self. We discover that the psychophysical organism we call "me" doesn't constitute anything substantial. It's just made up of many parts that work in unison, just like a car. But there's no core to it, no substance.

Thirdly, as we've noticed, whenever we do fall into a relationship of attachment, desire or aversion to the body, mind and heart, of identifying and possessing, suffering follows.

This is the third characteristic of unsatisfactoriness. We should develop an attitude towards the body, mind and heart as one who rents a house, not as one who owns one.

It is the observation of these three characteristics of transience, insubstantiality and unsatisfactoriness that brings about the spiritual insights that releases consciousness from its delusions and leads to liberation from all suffering. And it is this practice of *vipassanā* which is the tool we use. This bare attentiveness, simply observing all that arises and passes away, this choiceless awareness that does not control or manipulate, this impartial watchfulness that does not question or judge, this intuitive introspection, fully experiencing each mental and bodily phenomenon as it really is—this is the faculty of intuitive awareness, *satipaññā*, the very faculty that will eventually bring the realisation of Nibbāna, the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the unconditioned.

All we have to do is watch, just observe, whatever arises as it arises and passes away. So let's begin again with the breath. Rising, falling, touching.

During daily life, to sit like this even for a few moments, long enough to re-establish a calm and alert attentiveness, will stop our emotions from snowballing. It will undermine the causes of stress. Just fifteen seconds may be enough to re-establish our centre. With practice, this can become a regular state of mind, instead of something that comes only under special conditions.

This calm heart and alert mind is the state we ought to be in all the time, even under stress. It is within this inner environment that this intuitive awareness, *satipaññā*, can operate. Otherwise it becomes lost,

drowned and controlled by runaway thoughts and emotions. Constantly make the effort to regain and maintain this inner posture. This is to live fully consciously.

And in this way, the practice of *vipassanā*, insight meditation, will seep into every moment of our lives, and we will be rewarded with great benefits.

Now, when we come to the end of a meditation period, it's best not to just jump out of it, but come out slowly. First, opening the eyes and taking in the light, and gently swaying from side to side. Then, rising slowly and mindfully, and in this way our intuitive mindfulness, *satipaññā*, will be maintained.

May you be well, may you be happy, may you soon be liberated of all your suffering, may you experience the peace and bliss of Nibbāna.

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